

Afterimage, Sept-Oct, 2004 by Seth Thompson Jud Yalkut: Video Beachcomer

“Communes”, “hippies” and “anti-establishment” sometimes define the 1960s in America. Jud Yalkut, a pioneer in video art, embraced the counter-culture movement of the 1960s and created poignant works that attempt to define these times. Underknown in today's books on video art, he has collaborated with such notables as Nam June Paik, choreographer Trisha Brown and composer John Cage. The guiding theme within Yalkut's forty plus year career as an image-maker has been “spiritual transformation.” His work has been described as “psychedelic” but it goes much deeper than mere physical perception. Yalkut states that he views his art, “as a possible means of conveying the transcendent nature of life and the observed universe through the media.”

Yalkut's work is abstract. Images disintegrate, intermix or transform into new forms within a multi-layered environment. Colors may flare, vibrate or meld. Rather than attempting to create a clear, crisp narrative film, he seeks to manipulate, abstract and transform filmed events, objects, and people from popular culture and the “natural world.” Yalkut hopes that his work has an impact on his audience so that they start, “seeing things in new lights with new nuances and new meanings ... [transcending] ... surface perception that hopefully goes far deeper into an inner realization of oneness and beauty in the universe.”

Yalkut describes himself as a video beachcomber. He canvases the physical and cultural landscape--gathering imagery with his camera to be manipulated in post-production. His montage-like work has basically four stages of production: shooting and gathering imagery; initial edit of shot material; image processing or “image transformation through electronic transformation”; and finally editing everything together to make it flow as a piece. His current work likens a disjunctive flow where the “elements wake up the art.” Yalkut states, “In media you put down two pieces and then they have a relationship to each other and they start to talk to you.” He likens this “disjunctive harmony” to a sunset that appears to be tranquil but goes through so many violent and radical changes.

Born in New York City in 1938, Yalkut graduated from high school at the age of fourteen. A month before his fifteenth birthday, his parents tragically died--his mother from cancer and two weeks later his father had a heart attack. He spent a year at City College and then transferred to McGill University in Montreal to become a nuclear physicist. Disappointed by the fact that he was surrounded by engineers and “drill sergeant” instructors, he decided to change majors to English Literature to study and write poetry--a passion he had been interested in pursuing. Montreal was a hub for avant-garde poets both within the academic community and cafes. After his third year at McGill, he left college to concentrate on his poetry. He decided to use the remaining money from his parents' trust to explore life outside academia. Yalkut moved back to New York for a year and then decided to head west.

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In an email interview Yalkut writes, “Hitchhiking from Los Angeles to San Francisco after being in California for a couple of weeks in 1957. I got a ride with the Big Sur mailman who stopped at Partington Ridge, the mountain road on which Henry Miller and many other local luminaries

lived. I met Henry Miller there, as he was one of the people who came down to meet the mailman. We talked for three-quarters of an hour about many things, including the great used books shops, which used to dot 4th Avenue in New York City, the home city for both of us. When I returned from San Francisco a few months later on a short trip with two old friends from New York City who had turned up, they left me a sleeping bag and I decided to stay in Big Sur, which lasted a full year.” For Yalkut, it was a time of self-discovery where he learned about meditation, Hindu cooking and “living life.” The people and events during his stay at Big Sur laid a foundation for his ideas and concepts as a media artist. It was also the place where he wrote his last poem and did not write again until 1966 when he was asked to write art criticism for ARTS-Magazine in New York City.

In 1961, Yalkut yearned to experiment with film and so his first wife gave him an 8 mm camera as a gift. It was a time of tremendous production for him--producing “8 or 9 films” from 1961-62. In 1964, he bought a used Bolex 16 mm camera. With the instrument he created, *Diffraction Film* a ten-minute piece that used a grating filter that produced a mesmerizing radiating pattern. The film was an important work for Yalkut because it laid the groundwork for his future aesthetics.

The same year as he bought the camera, he began collaborating with USCO (The Company of Us) an interdisciplinary group that combined poetry, painting, filmmaking, and electronics to form live environmental experiences. Yalkut writes in an e-mail, “*Diffraction Film* was my first completed 16mm film, first shown in 1965 and featured as the only single screen work in the USCO multimedia show *Hubbub*, and later *We Are All One*. The film was released as a silent work, but in the USCO presentations [the piece] was shown with a taped soundtrack of natural sounds and mild electronics.”

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Yalkut was the resident filmmaker for the counterculture collective, USCO, that considered itself a “spiritual communal.” In a 2000 interview with Keith Pandolfi, Yalkut states, “We did shows in museums and we did shows with Marshal McLuhan and Timothy Leary. We toured all over; we were the entertainment at the LSD conference at the University of San Francisco; we did a show called *Us Down by the Riverside!* at the Riverside Museum in New York.”

While Yalkut was working with USCO, he also began collaborating with Nam June Paik. They met in 1965 when Yalkut asked to film Paik's work at the Bonino Gallery. Paik and Yalkut's first collaborative effort was *Turn, Turn, Turn*, an “exploration in the filmic translation of kinetic and luministic artworks.” The film was a tremendous success at many film festivals, galleries and art houses. According to Yalkut, the source material for *Turn, Turn, Turn* came from “cybernated light-refracting sculptures (Nicholas Schoffer), moving reflected 'lumia' light (Julio LeParc), electronically controlled and strobed light (USCO), and the 'pure' electronic light which the cathode ray tube emits (Nam June Paik).” The soundtrack for the film is a sampled and modified version of “*Turn! Turn! Turn!*” by the Byrds.

As a filmmaker, Yalkut was one of the first to embrace video technology as a mode of artistic expression. According to Yalkut, before artists started making videotapes they were recording

off the video monitor and onto film. This is how Turn, Turn, Turn began and his collaboration with Nam June Paik started. In a 1975 interview with Jud Rosebush, Yalkut stated that, "I was very much into the McLuhanistic idea that you can isolate the effect of the media from the content of the media, and often from the package. So you get inside a television set and you film what's going on and you transmute it through editing, superimposition, and any other technique in a filmic experience." Yalkut continues, "Then you take the film and put it back into video and do things that can't be done in film. And you work back and forth through a series of generations that way. You make use of the imperfections of the medium and you become more aware of what the limits of the medium are. I use the limit of the medium to define it at the end of the film."

Like the abstract expressionists, Yalkut works intuitively--operating with a basic concept but letting each piece take on its own meaning while working within the traditional rules of form and composition. He samples elements from the natural world, popular culture, and religion to process them. As the years have passed, he has continued with his theme of "spiritual transformation" through sensory overload and aesthetic impact--incorporating new technologies and ideas into his work.

Completed in 2000 for Yalkut's retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, "Vision Cantos" is an installation that consists of projected videos that envelope the viewer. Mats are placed on the floor to encourage meditation. Projected on three walls are looped videos that vary from 3 to 8 minutes, which expound colorfully fused images of nature, animals and a Tibetan shrine. Vibrant psychedelic colors replace the more subdued natural hues found in nature. Yalkut uses his camera to pan, tilt and zoom in and out on leaves, branches, flowers and animals to create a sensory combustion of imagery potentially forcing the viewer into a meditative-like state. The constant camera movement and change of imagery keeps the viewer attentive to the action at hand. In a sense, the piece is reminiscent of Mark Rothko's Chapel in Houston Texas where the viewer is immersed in paintings creating a place of meditation.

A one channel piece completed in 2002, "Light Display: Color," is an homage to Yalkut's life long influence Lazlo Moholy-Nagy. Using footage from a shoot Yalkut did in 1970 at the Howard Wise Gallery of Moholy-Nagy's Space-Light Modulator, he created the work using, "digital video, image processing and synthesis, allowing me to finally complete a transformative interpretation of his kinetic sensibility." The piece was a thirty-year endeavor. Yalkut writes that "Light Display: Color" is "a visual fantasy of what Moholy might have realized in the new age of technology featuring video and digital technology. Inspired by Moholy's original treatment for his film, I am fashioning this material into a visually poetic tribute to his genius and his constant inspiration to my personal work over several decades." Yalkut filmed the motorized glass and metal sculpture, which provided an ideal form for image processing. Close-up black and white shots of rolling balls and rotating metallic sculptural elements intermixed with colorfully synthesized variations create a compelling if not meditative or transfixing platform for the viewer.

Yalkut's work in film and video evokes the idealism and optimism of his formative years of the 1960s. Refining his ideas and experimenting with new technologies. Yalkut continues to work on his art to create meditative installations and single channel works. This past year, he received a

Lifetime Achievement Fellowship from the Montgomery County Arts and Cultural District in Southwest Ohio where he has been residing since 1973.

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